

## CFSP/CSDP Inter-Parliamentary Conference 4-6 September 2019, Helsinki

### Background Paper: Workshop 1.

#### Political Developments in the Western Balkans

Over 15 years after the Thessaloniki Conference, where the prospect of the Western Balkan countries joining the European Union (EU) was first formally recognised in 2003, the accession process remains a key theme in the politics of the region. Despite individual steps forward, such as the membership of Croatia in 2008, overall progress remains uncertain, and confidence in the EU's commitment to the membership perspective has also waned. Meanwhile, other concerns have risen on the political agenda, some of which can be traced back to the unresolved issues remaining after the conflicts of the 1990s. Three trends in particular stand out that are relevant to the EU's role in the Balkans: the future of enlargement, democratisation and regional stability.

The EU's new strategy for the Western Balkans, launched in February 2018, was widely considered as an effort to kick-start the enlargement process. Its aim was to present a credible enlargement perspective, supported financially by the EU, where progress on fulfilling EU criteria would be rewarded with concrete steps towards accession. Yet the decision of the European Council in June 2018 not to open membership negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia despite their progress in meeting EU criteria prompted doubts as to whether the EU will be able to keep its commitment in the face of opposition from individual member states. It has also been argued that the EU's own procedure for monitoring progress on membership criteria may yield inappropriate incentives.

Overall the countries are at various stages on their way towards the EU. Formal negotiations have only been started with Serbia and Montenegro, often perceived as the frontrunners. Their Country Reports for 2019, however, suggest a trend of stalling progress, especially with regard to democratic institutions. Albania and North Macedonia have made the biggest advances in the recent years and the European Commission has again recommended that the European Council open negotiations in its meeting in June. Meanwhile, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo<sup>1</sup> remain potential candidate countries but, due to what the EC describes as deep-seated structural problems, are considered to be a long way from achieving candidate status.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper, this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Democratisation presents one of the challenges on the road ahead. Concerns have been raised especially with regard to Serbia, where the president Aleksandar Vučić is taking an increasingly stringent hold of political institutions and the media. Large anti-government demonstrations have been taking place in the country since December 2018, and Freedom House downgraded Serbia's status to "partially free" in 2019. Meanwhile, Montenegro has been ruled by the same president and party since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and shows little sign of democratic reform. So far, however, the European Commission has refrained from taking a strong stand on the undemocratic tendencies in the two countries.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, democratisation has stalled in particular due to the inefficiency of the administration, caused by the constitutional division of the country into three entities along ethnic lines. Kosovo is experiencing similar issues with a weak institutional set-up and a political context that EU reporting describes as "highly polarised". Deficiencies in governance and lack of representation have further aggravated problems such as unemployment and corruption, both of which are major causes of dissatisfaction. In Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular, this has also resulted in protests. North Macedonia, on the other hand, presents an example of relatively fast reform in democracy and rule of law, following a change of government in 2017.

The situation also remains ambiguous with regard to regional stability. Serbia and Kosovo have not been able to normalise their relations even through a dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, facilitated by the EU, which aims for a "comprehensive and legally binding agreement" between the countries. The process was stirred up further in 2018 as the presidents of both Serbia and Kosovo suggested a land swap as a potentially acceptable solution to accompany an agreement. The proposition alarmed some analysts, who argue that any re-drawing of borders in the Balkans would have region-wide ramifications especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina and North Macedonia. However, the idea was at least implicitly welcomed by the EU and the United States as a possible way out of the current deadlock. The situation remains tense, however, as it is unlikely that the proposal would be approved in the parliaments of either country.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the hard-line nationalist president Milorad Dodik of the Serbian-dominated Republika Srpska has reinforced his rhetoric calling for secession and integration into Serbia. While the initiative has not gained the support of Serbia, it feeds instability in a country where the constitutional division also contributes to uneasy relations between the three entities. North Macedonia provides a brighter example as it has managed to negotiate a deal in its decades-long name dispute with Greece. However, similarly decisive steps may prove to be more elusive with regard to addressing the underlying tension caused by an ethnic divide between Macedonians and Albanians in the country, although the new government has already made some efforts on this issue as well.

It may be too early to assess the results of the EU's efforts to reinforce its engagement in the Western Balkans. It is clear, however, that if the EU aims to have a constructive role in the region in the future, it will need to have active relations with the regional countries. Increasingly, the Western Balkans has also become interesting to other major actors - particularly Russia, China, Turkey and the Arab Emirates - who have provided finance and diplomatic support to individual countries. This influence may not always coincide with the interests of the EU.

**Points of discussion:**

- How can the EU present a credible enlargement perspective to the Western Balkan countries while also ensuring continued progress on goals such as democratisation?
- What kind of a role should the EU have in fostering regional stability and dialogue?